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Chinese Storytelling in the Xi Jinping Era

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Summary

In the era of Xi Jinping in China, the international profile of the country has risen. So too has its need to proactively spell out what its rise means to the rest of the world. This essay looks at the ways in which China has attempted to tell its story, and the challenges it has faced from a world that often knows little about it but also has strong, antipathetic opinions about its political system.

Keywords

China – Xi Jinping – Chinese international relations – propaganda

1 Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has a story to tell. We know that because this is something its leaders and the propaganda department of the Communist Party are repeatedly saying.¹ In the past, in Maoist China (1949-1976) or China in the era of early reform in the 1980s, the country had either an ideology or a viewpoint it regarded as objectively true (broadly Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by Mao Zedong) and which it wanted the world to understand, be converted to and then embrace.² As with most of those in the business of proselytising, there was no compromise or negotiation. But these days, China is talking in far softer words about the 'China Dream', the common destiny for

¹ Bandurski 2017.

² Lovel 2019.

mankind, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the idea of win-win — at least until the COVID-19 crisis disrupted things from the beginning of 2020 and made for a sharper situation. While the story it is telling might be particular to Chinese circumstances, it is structured in the same way as those being deployed in Western democracies — ‘Make America Great Again’ in the United States or ‘Get Brexit Done’ in the United Kingdom in late 2019. It broadly focusses on national greatness, power and status. One of the most important differences to others is the teller of the story — the Chinese Party State and its complex network of agents. This is relatively new to this sort of activity in the international stage. And the message of this story is one that sits atop a complex set of other issues and, most strikingly of all, is being conveyed to a world that in many cases has little proper knowledge of China, its history, culture or circumstances, and that was divided, at least until 2020, about what to think of this new actor and what it is saying. That means that the China story is greeted by responses ranging from utter acceptance (Pakistan) to deep scepticism (Europe) to outright hostility (the United States and India).

2 What Is the China Story?

First off, however, we have to ask a very basic question: What is the China story? Then, we have to move on to the question of how is it told, and why? In fact, to answer the first question, we need to be clear that the China story inside the PRC under Xi Jinping is one thing; the story as it is told to the outside world is another, even though the two are intimately connected. This gives the phenomenon an intrinsic complexity right from the start, and means it is worthwhile investing in the time to disaggregate them.³

Domestically, the China story has arisen from the whole narrative of Communist rule since the Party came to power in 1949. Teller of a liberation story in its early era, and associated with understanding China's histories before the modern era as ones marked by feudalism, class struggle and exploitation, the China story was always characterised in the telling by a strong, almost mystical sense of China as a kind of Great Ideal, an almost spiritual entity that lay at the heart of nationalism right from the start of the 20th century. While it predated him, this story appeared strongly in the works of Mao, and has been duplicated by his successors, despite their significant differences from him in other areas of politics and polity. In this narrative of nationalism, the most striking feature is the ways that China figures as the victim in modern history,

³ Brown 2018, 45-46.

one which is now finally marching towards its liberation and renaissance. The sense of China's rectification and its receiving justice being imminent was, and remains, a huge mobilising message for Chinese people, whatever their individual views of the Communist Party delivering this might be. In a sense, it served as the Party's trump card, despite the many serious mistakes it made during its era in power, from the Great Leap Forward of 1958 to the terrible famines of the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution from 1966. In the Party's historiography, these were venal sins compared to the sole cardinal sin — betraying the national interest — something the Party has sworn it will never do.

By the 1990s, despite the economic, social and diplomatic changes made by the country after the 1978 reforms of the leadership around Deng Xiaoping following the death of Mao two years earlier, this underpinning sense of nationalism as the core message for the Party was compounded by the wave of patriotic education campaigns waged in the country.⁴ Insecurity from the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, along with divisions about the speed and scale of reform in the Party itself, meant that stressing the need to 'love China' became a great unifying slogan and sentiment. Questions about what the concept of China at the heart of this might be and any divisions there were unwelcome. There was a great, ancient, unified entity called China, the Party State's arguments went, that needed to be renewed and restored to its central role in the world after the indignities it had suffered at the hands of others in modern history. That was all that need to be said on the matter. This was China's destiny. More importantly, it delivered on the mission of the Party itself, with its teleological and positive view of history drawn from Marxist dialectics. China's rise was inevitable, scientifically ensured by the logic of Marxism-Leninism. It was unavoidable. Those who opposed it within the country were simply fighting against the inevitable. This mindset has persisted to this day. The sole difference is that it has been compounded by the continuing economic success of the country, and by the successful sustainability of the Party's monopoly on power.

This domestic story has its own dynamic. It is crucial for the legitimacy of the Party, and for its public communication strategy with a population that is untouched and unmoved by the gritty details of Marxism-Leninism but can be reached through less dogmatic appeals to the strong powerful nation narrative.⁵ The self-same story facing outwards has a different dynamic because of the non-Chinese cultural and political context it needs to be told in.

⁴ Callahan 2009, 31-61.

⁵ Perry 2017, 29-51.

This is where the China Dream converted from the country rising and being strong and powerful again to the more conciliatory idea of ‘win-win’ and ‘common destiny’, phrases that occur so often in Chinese external propaganda and publicity material now. This is associated particularly with the Belt and Road Initiative, the key foreign policy idea of Xi from 2013. The main objectives of this storytelling are twofold — to ensure that China has a geopolitical space that is rightfully its own, and which recognises its return to global primacy, but also to reassure the world that this is a process which will work out to everyone’s benefit. This is a mixture of the assertive (the former) and the placatory (the latter).⁶

3 Xi Jinping and Telling the Story

Xi’s stress on the importance of telling this China global story has been a striking feature of his leadership right from the earliest months after his elevation to Party Secretary in November 2012. The previous Hu Jintao era (2002-2012) had been one of phenomenal growth. In the decade following China’s entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the economy quadrupled. This was the era of the great enrichment. But it had not been accompanied by a strengthening of the country’s international narrative. This decade can now be seen as one of a silent China — the time when the world’s third-, and then from 2010 second-largest economy acted more like a mouse than a dragon. The reticence of China was best represented by the wooden, technocratic language of Hu himself, barren on personal references and any attempt to enliven and excite his audience, despite the extraordinary things going on around him.⁷

In early 2013, Xi commanded the country’s leaders, its media and public and its diplomatic service to ‘tell the China story’ and to do so proactively. The ‘China Dream’ slogan was the main means of doing this — a dream that was presented as one that everyone inside and outside of the country could share.⁸ China’s economy was a global benefit and a common source for enrichment and development in this story. It was a benign and positive thing, not a cause of anxiety, threat and challenges. While the language and tone of nationalism within China often sounded shrill and assertive, outside the country it was

6 Brown 2017, 201-216.

7 Brown 2012, 154.

8 Xi 2014.

more friendly. China, as Xi said when speaking in France in 2014, was a 'lovely friendly lion'.⁹ There was nothing to worry about.

Despite these consoling words, a new player with such a different historic background, one with a wholly different political model and one whose appearance to international prominence had been so sudden was always going to present issues. After all, even in the 1980s and 1990s, China was a relatively marginal actor. Its explosive growth in the 21st century presented as many problems for it as for the world outside in terms of working out what the meaning of its rise meant, and what might happen next. The story was simply a framework to try to keep control of a potentially uncontrollable situation. But every story needs to have someone telling that story, and it was the issue of who was telling this new story in the Chinese case that presented some of the sharpest challenges.

First, the teller was largely a particular political entity — the Communist Party of China. It was the one that created and dominated the rendition of the domestic narrative, and therefore by definition was at the heart of the outward telling too. Even if, as it sometimes tried to, the Party spoke through various proxies and different agents it was addressing a world which overwhelmingly did not share its political values. No amount of finessing and obfuscation could conceal this. The audience was in the country's chief markets in Europe, the United States and the rest of the liberal multi-democratic world, along with partners who may not have been democracies but were certainly not communist in Latin America, Africa and Central Asia. Had China at least shared some common political ground with the world around it, an already challenging situation of a new power rising to the top of global influence may have been easier to navigate. As it was, China was doing something intrinsically disruptive, with a noticeably different system and view of the world.

Because of the teller of the story was such an exceptional entity, a good part of what China's core message might be was off limits. China could not assume a common values system or a common set of aspirations in the political realm to the external audience it was talking to. Even if it did want to replace the global order rotating around the United States with one focussed on China, it would have required a massive act of persuasion and knowledge dissemination. As it was, it seems more accurate to describe China's task as a nation as simply acquiring a specific international space for itself where at least others granted it the benefit of the doubt and saw it as in their self-interest to not try to have conflicts with it. That meant that the China story externally was framed

9 MOFA 2014.

in a way that appealed to this self-interest, and in that way assumed an almost mercenary, materialistic tone. It focussed on the part of the overall China narrative that everyone was likely to appreciate and be interested in — economic benefits and getting rich together.

4 Challenges on Telling the Story outside China

This helps to explain something about the structure of the story that China tells globally. Whatever appeals to idealism and ideals there might be are mostly so abstract as to be almost meaningless — slogans about common humanity, common destiny, a global happy future. There are few, if any, appeals to specific political values like Chinese collectivism or its notions of stability at all costs, largely because these would not be considered attractive outside the Chinese context. While Xi had talked a little about the notion of a China model of governance that combined high economic growth with social stability which others might want to emulate from 2017, the idea remains a vague, undeveloped one.¹⁰ China, it seems, wants tolerance for itself, not the adoption of its unique, very Sinocentric system by others. Instead, the subliminal message in this iteration of the China Dream is that all live on one planet, all must all be tolerant of each other's values, living and letting live is the best philosophy, and if the world achieves that it can then focus on achieving the main shared thing — getting materially richer and better off.

This sort of story has a simplicity, and can appeal to a wide constituency who, in fact, do just want to get better off. For this group, China's immense economy is incentivising, both as a template for what they might do to enrich themselves and as a target where they can trade and invest and make benefits for themselves. That gives the story a sometimes almost transactional quality. It is about win-win, about everyone coming out with something, about standard, demotic processes such as buying and selling things, putting more money in the bank, being able to afford things that once were far out of reach. Everyone is getting richer and better off. What's not to like?

The optimism of this story is one of its chief sources of power and appeal. So, too, is the way that it keys into the priority for most responsible governments to try to make the people they govern better off. The great challenge, however, is that the story's simplicity and limitations lead to questions being raised about it. Is it true that the Chinese government is so benign it just wants a happy ending for everyone, people might ask? Could it be that this conceals a

¹⁰ Xi 2017a, 543-553.

far deeper, larger ambition — to see a world made soporific and unsuspecting through the money flowing into it that, before it knows it, it finds itself under a Chinese hegemony that has just appeared? This hegemony, because of the values issues referred to above, would be an enforced one. Like frogs being boiled in water, the more pessimistic predict that the world is being lulled into a sense of false security by a China story promising only wealth and prosperity and happiness but actually silently constructing servitude. When challenged about why they have such negative thoughts, critics simply come back with the retort: 'Don't be misled by the story. Look at the storyteller'.

5 The Belt and Road Initiative

There are two case studies that represent the challenges. The first is the Belt and Road Initiative mentioned above. This typifies many of the problems of Chinese story telling in the current era under Xi. The BRI originally appeared in 2013 as a New Silk Road, and then became One Belt and One Road before settling into the current moniker. The BRI is a bold idea, one that typifies the proactive language and nature of diplomacy and communication under Xi. It seeks to achieve a number of goals. First, it conveys to the Asian region the positive role that China can play as a trade partner, potential investor and builder of infrastructure. This leverages on the country's own wide experience in this area. China as a supplier of high-speed rail, of dams and of other critical infrastructure makes sense because it has a good track record of doing this successfully in its own environment.¹¹

Second, the BRI uses the benign issue of economics to stake out its own rightful international space. With no straightforward political or security strand, the BRI can at least create a zone of Chinese influence in a way that the United States cannot easily contest. As the world's second-largest economy, China feels that it has its own legitimate zone, and that it should not live in one constrained by the United States and its massive alliance system. At the same time, it does not want to antagonise the world's sole remaining military superpower. It utilises this narrow area of economics to create a Sinosphere. Even with this, however, it has received suspicion and criticism. But it has achieved at least some successes.

Third, the BRI figures not as a story told by one actor but as one to which many others can contribute different narrative threads and chapters. No implementing agency with sole responsibility over the BRI has been set up

¹¹ Xi 2017b.

in Beijing. There are many people able to take parts of the story out into the wider world — state enterprises, private businesspeople, local government. They speak to diverse audiences, in a non-normative, non-prescriptive way, encouraging them through dialogue to make their own bespoke version of the grand narrative being unfolded. The BRI has therefore fragmented into many different parts, varying in the ways in which it is told dependent on if this is in Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia or Central and Eastern Europe.

These various aspects of the BRI are sources of strength but also of problems. They show well the real challenges of Chinese Party State storytelling as it migrates across the borders of the country into the outside world. So much of who, how and why stories told in China can be controlled by the Party. But in the wider world, of course, these disappear. Then, it becomes a case of reaching different audiences with varying levels of enthusiasm and scepticism. For some, as already stated, the fact that the BRI is only about the economics strikes them as unfeasible and emotionally unsatisfying. It seems like they are being exposed to a story where they want romance and mystery and all they get is a simple causative narrative which offers little to the imagination.

For others, the epic scope of the idea typifies the story of the command economy planning, monolithic nature of Communist politics. It is almost pre-modern in its tone. In an era in which the local has made a strong return, and where great processes of globalisation make people nervous, the BRI is seen as too epic and dramatic. It is almost inhuman in its scale.¹²

COVID-19 from 2020 has brought many of these issues of China's image, and its story, to the forefront. The likely origination of the pandemic in Wuhan, China, means that as it spread across the rest of the world, the country started to figure in people's daily lives and influence in ways that had never before been so explicit and visible. Suddenly, politicians, commentators and members of the public all acquired a need to know what they thought about China. Many in the United States and Europe became decidedly more negative. The problematisation of the country intensified. Its own diplomacy was exposed, through the phenomenon of wolf warriors, as being shrill, assertive and defensive. Above all, COVID-19 showed that a country with a huge economy, inter-linked into the global supply chain and able to influence debates from climate change to public health to international economic development, when it had the sort of political model China did created often highly divided and sometimes unambiguously hostile responses. The issue here was not that people were not listening; it was that they were listening, and deeply disliked what they were hearing and who was speaking to them.¹³

¹² Hornby and Zhang 2019.

¹³ Brown and Wang 2020.

6 Conclusion

The China story is one that needs to be told, despite all these challenges. That is unavoidable. The aspirations and interests of a fifth of humanity cannot be ignored or discounted, even when an issue as difficult as a global pandemic occurs. This is regardless of the political system that China lives under. No matter what, there will, therefore, be a China story. The way in which that story is told and who takes the lead in telling it will continue to pose problems. Chinese narratives come from a different cultural context. This is true of anywhere. They are told in a way which is often at variance with the way stories are told in, for instance, Europe and the United States, with their love of strong climaxes and clear narrative direction. Anyone who has read one of the great Chinese classic novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin from the 18th century,¹⁴ will know the sprawling, often difficult shape of Chinese tales. Despite this, Chinese people are like people anywhere. They enjoy stories. But like people anywhere, the way those stories are told is often conditioned by cultural norms and traditions.

On the question of who tells the story beside the Chinese state, there can be some flexibility. Chinese students, tourists, businesspeople, artistic figures and the public can all take part in this grand act of storytelling and contribute their own specific narratives. In some ways, the more this happens, the more the story becomes human, and the more palatable it is likely to be outside of China's borders. But the commanding role of the state in this great act of storytelling is also, until such a time as China's political system changes, unlikely to change. The best thing is for people, wherever they are, to accept, and then seek out, these other voices coming from China, and not just be preoccupied with the dominant one. The voices are there, if one is willing to listen.

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¹⁴ Cao [1791] 1958.

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